

FEBRUARY 5, 1987

December and January were so cold and wet in the Shortgrass Country that feed runs were postponed at times.

Old cows accustomed to standing and bawling until a high protein handout was dispensed at their convenience found themselves rooting in the ice and snow in hopes of finding something to assuage their hunger pains. The woolies fared somewhat better, but ours began to lap up poison bitterweed like it was a fine conditioning feed for pregnant ewes.

In every pasture, sheep were staggering about, stringing green discharge from their noses and stumbling over tufts of grass as if they were being tripped by wires. In the detoxification pens about as much hay was being trampled into the ground as was being consumed. Along the sides of these corrals the dead and the dying were waiting to be given their final ride to the bone pile that we keep busy each winter. And on one of those fateful days I got the report that we were about out of hay.

The principal source of sheep quality alfalfa is the valley land in Southeastern New Mexico. The Land of Enchantment, along with growing a very fine-stemmed leafy hay, polishes a man's wits and talents the same way that the fierce desert winds out there smooth off the hard rock ledges. Like the sunlight in the far away Orient seems to seed man's mind with wisdom, the sunshine across the ranchlands of the state stimulates the citizens' imagination and sharpens their senses to barter and trade. For a Texan to match them is like Snow White and her gang of dwarfs taking on the New York Giants for a football game.

But I had to have some more hay, so I began to make calls. The more I talked to dealers and farmers, the more desperate the supply of hay became, until I finally remembered an hombre that had got me some alfalfa in another tough year. "Monte," he said, "the trouble is the Florida truckers are hauling sheep in here and backhauling hay. They've run the market up \$10 or \$15 a ton, plus they are giving another \$8 a ton to get it loaded."

At that second it came back as clear as if it happened a month ago. The other time that I'd been at his mercy, the milk cow operators up in Wisconsin were bringing in spotted heifer yearlings so fast that the road in front of his farm was a streak of black and white Holsteins in one lane and the other was solid green from the hay being hauled back north.

Funny thing, though, about all those dairy heifers. They must have died that spring, because the following summer I was over a large scope of New Mexico and I saw only 3 head of milk stock and they were on a peanut farm.

Once spring hits and the bitterweed lets up, we are going to have a big sheep boom. I'd sure like to see a ewe in New Mexico that'd been raised in the Everglades, but it'd probably be better to wait and have one of those hay farmers describe her.